The Bodhisattva Vow: More Than Just Ethical Outsourcing

I've been reflecting a lot on the Bodhisattva vow. In particular, on how its vast and aspirational nature can quietly fool us into thinking we are not really supposed to take it too seriously right now. After all, we tell ourselves, who are we to presume we can save sentient beings everywhere from the suffering of samsara, when we can barely keep our own heads above water?

For those not familiar with it, the Bodhisattva vow is encouraged in various Vajrayana and Mahayana traditions. When you become a Buddhist, you first take the refuge vow, meaning you take refuge in the Three Jewels. You acknowledge that you are lost at sea, a refugee with no ground beneath your feet. You acknowledge that you do not know how to fix the pain and emptiness that appear in the quiet moments between activities. You do not know how to kick your unhelpful habits of thought and behaviour, or how to become the person you sense you are supposed to be living as.

So you call upon the protection of the teacher in the form of the Buddha, the path in the form of the Dharma, and the community of fellow travellers who, for better or worse, you accept as your companions on the journey.

It is an act of great sanity. You do not gain citizenship anywhere particularly. Buddhism cannot offer you that kind of security without falling into the same old habits of ego, however hard we may try to make it do so. If we establish security in the path, we are almost certainly not travelling it any more. We have bunkered down somewhere, hoping to ride out the storm.

But the only way out of confusion is through it, head first. When you acclimatise yourself to the weather, the texture of the road, and the signs and symbols guiding you on, you start to accept your own homelessness. You start to appreciate the chill of the cold air, reminding you that you are alive and moving forward. You start to feel less nostalgia towards the hut, or the cave you found yourself evicted from. You start to realise that it was too small anyway, that it did not fit. What was intended as a temporary protective layer had become a cocoon and a prison, and you no longer knew how to embrace the challenge of the moment of your life.

A new kind of hope can dawn. It is not glamorous or heroic. You have not become anything special. If anything, you feel somewhat less significant than before, which brings humility, and the ventilation of open space.

At that point you are ready to take a different kind of vow. In fact, according to Buddhist tradition, you are ready to take the ultimate vow, and it reveals itself to you through the journey you have begun. You are being invited to open up your space, and share whatever provisions, shelter, and happiness you have discovered with others, any others.

This is the seed of the Bodhisattva vow, a seed that, if planted with care and nurtured with attention and constancy, will one day become a wish fulfilling tree. You will become a wish fulfilling tree rather than owning one that grants your wishes.

The transformative power of such a vow is incalculable. You have a vague idea, a remote concept, of what it must be to live in peace as an enlightened being, a Buddha no less, and you are willing to say no. I will not take that route to peace and paradise, not while others are still suffering in exactly the same way I have been suffering.

So you renounce it. You declare, in front of your teacher or preceptor, that enlightenment can wait. You have work to do, and you promise to never give up until the hell realms are emptied, the animals are liberated, and humans everywhere discover their dignity, love, and self-respect.

It is relatively easy to mean it in the midst of such a traditional ceremony. You may have been practising diligently, meditating on compassion and emptiness, purifying your mind and clarifying your intention so that when you utter those words, you do so fully, with synchronised body, speech, and mind. Ideally, you will have more clarity of purpose than you have ever had as you say the words, whatever they may be, along the lines of:

“For as long as samsara remains, for as long as sentient beings are lost, confused, and tormented, I will be there as a raft, a ferryman, a friend, and a guide. I renounce liberation until all have accomplished it.”

You are inspired. You have turned a corner. You have discovered your purpose and finally know your true calling. And then reality kicks in. You are once again snowed under at work, stuck in traffic surrounded by speedy and aggressive drivers, or back in the hassles of relationship problems or money issues. It is hard to entirely remember what it was you were supposed to be doing, what it was that was supposed to be different now.

And then you remember. The name I received, my Bodhisattva name, is not my real name. It is the future Bodhisattva I will be in some unspecified number of future lives. Of course I cannot do it now. No one could possibly expect that of me, could they? I will do it later. I will keep meditating when I can, and a future incarnation of my no-soul, empty flame essence will be there. I will fulfil this vow then.

I will be wiser with a couple more lifetimes on the paths of accumulation and unification. I will be awake then, realised, and able to do what I promised. I will know how to find all of these sentient beings I have vowed to help. I will know where to look for them, I will understand exactly what they need, and I will have the resources to give it to them.

I am not aiming to mock anyone, or to question the profound commitment to goodness that is made in undertaking such an endeavour. I am merely talking from experience, my own and that of the fellow would be Bodhisattvas who formed my community.

It is difficult, of course it is. We have promised to do something truly wondrous, truly special, and yet feeling that this makes us special is exactly what will undermine its fruition.

The only way forward is to transform this extraordinary conviction into something obvious, humdrum almost, and profoundly ordinary. The mistake lies in thinking we have to already be special to begin the task we have promised to do.

We do not need to wait for our wiser and more idealised self to materialise. We do not need extra sensory perception to find the people who need our help. They are all around us, to the extent that it is almost more effort not to see them. If we pay attention, it will be obvious what they need from us in the very moment of our encounter. We do not need more wisdom to see it, only honest and receptive eyes. We do not need more resources, simply the open and unguarded perspective required to respond accurately, to do the thing we are being invited to do.

It is not an easy thing to do things differently. Human beings are habit forming creatures by design. We can change almost any habit we want, but we have to force that change, or rather create an

equivalent force to the momentum behind those habits. It is easier to retreat, to hide behind our own weakness and defer activity, blindly trusting a future incarnation to resolve everything for us.

“Can’t Someone Else Do It?” The Mantra of Magical Conscription

The problem with this approach to the Bodhisattva vow is that we are outsourcing the actual work to what is effectively a different person. A founding principle of Buddhism, and a key departure from the prevailing Hindu outlook at the time of its emergence, was the rejection of the eternity of the soul and the continuity of any enduring self or identity. Anatta, no soul, no self, cuts directly through the notion of immortality.

The flame of a torch may be passed on to the next runner, who will take up the journey you started and make it their own, but it will not be you in any real or meaningful sense. So who are you to dictate their journey and path, to make promises that you intend them to fulfil on your behalf? You cannot, in all good faith, make that promise and bind someone else to it.

It is a form of ethical outsourcing. You may as well expect your neighbour, your colleague at work, or a stranger on the street to fulfil your promises for you. It is not fair, and in spite of your deep sincerity, it is not entirely honest. You are attempting to magically conscript another person to fulfil the obligation you have created for yourself.

It reminds me of an episode of *The Simpsons*. Garbage workers are on strike, rubbish is everywhere, and Homer turns moral responsibility into a fantasy of delegation and abdication. “I promise that someone will do the work,” but without specifying exactly who, or why he has the authority to make a promise on their behalf.

A vow only has meaning if it binds the person who speaks it, at the moment they speak it, without support or guarantees.

Of course, within the Buddhist framework it is understood that the vow plants karmic seeds that will ripen in future lives. I do not wish to trace the almost limitless chain reaction that a vow, spoken from the heart, may give rise to. But that is a question of metaphysics rather than an issue of moral agency.

Planting seeds is not the same thing as fulfilling a vow. If someone said, “I promised to help you, so I established some conditions under which a future person may be able to help you one day,” we would recognise that something significant had been done. Without a doubt it would matter. But we would also recognise that it is not quite what was promised.

Making It Real

Sometimes the Bodhisattva vow only becomes real when it is approached through failure rather than inspiration, through a recognition of the people we have let down. The moments we were not there when someone needed us. The fact that the consequences mattered. When the vow arises from that place, it gains perspective.

We can promise to make amends. We can promise to find them again, however hard it may be and however long it may take, and give more than we failed to give them this time around.

From there, we can step into a new space by acknowledging an empowering principle that appears in maitri practice, but is equally applicable to living by the Bodhisattva vow. In maitri we consider

that, in the fathomless reaches of beginningless time, all sentient beings have been our protectors, our mothers, and our children, and that we have, in one life or another, let them all down.

The responsibility we feel so keenly towards those we know we have failed can then extend to every living being, not with a sense of guilt or regret, but with a sense of urgency. A sense of, “I do not know who you are now, but I will not let you down again.” In this way the vow becomes ours, and ours alone. We only pass on to a future manifestation of our karmic tendencies what we are unable to accomplish now.

The Bodhisattva vow does not ask us to become something other than we are, or to wait for a future version of ourselves to arrive. It asks us to stop postponing responsibility in the only place it can ever be exercised, which is here, now, and imperfectly. When the vow is taken up in that spirit, it no longer belongs to an imagined future. It belongs to the person who speaks it, and to the moment in which it is spoken.